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Creating a More Inclusive Community through Social Justice Activism

As grassroots movement for social equity and justice builds on campus, RWU expands programming for Social Justice Month



Last fall, Barbershop, a student club for men of color on campus, started Unity Way, an effort that brought together student groups to promote positive relationships throughout the campus community through messages of inclusivity, equity and hope in the center of the Bristol campus.

October 4, 2017 | Jill Rodrigues '05

BRISTOL, R.I. – Passionate and dedicated efforts toward social equity and justice have gained significant momentum across campus over the past few years, mirroring what the nation has seen play out in the media spotlight.

Students have staged highly visible actions like the “die-in” with solidarity for the Black Lives Matter movement at the start of the Fall 2015 semester. And there are out-of-sight good deeds such as the ongoing work of Food Recovery Network volunteers who spend their nights packaging uneaten leftovers from the Dining Commons and delivering it to local women’s shelters. Whether it's taking action or adding their voices to support a cause, Roger Williams University students, faculty and staff have responded to the difficult issues arising in the national dialogue with a desire for raising the collective conscience and working toward solutions.

"Students have been very active and demanding in recognition of social justice issues on campus, from the creation of all-gender bathrooms to the student body's demand for a course on diversity," said Autumn Quezada-Grant, associate professor of history at RWU. "In many ways, this social justice initiative has not been top-down, but coming from the bottom up. This has been a true grassroots movement through collaboration between students, faculty, staff and administration. We hear them and we are trying to bring their voice forward."

In response to this, Quezada-Grant and Professor Laura D'Amore launched an initiative in 2012 – Social Justice Week – that brings together student groups and faculty experts for an annual week in October aimed at sparking dialogue and inspiring the campus community around a variety of social justice issues. They held a Social Justice Summit in 2014 during which students, faculty and staff unpacked the term "social justice" and helped stimulate a culture of social activism. And for two years, they led a Social Justice and Diversity Faculty Learning Community, a multidisciplinary professional development that educated faculty members on how to address issues of social justice and diversity and incorporate these topics into their courses.

With momentum continuing to build on campus, Quezada-Grant and D'Amore were inundated with requests from professors and students wanting to participate in this year's annual programming. Now called Social Justice Month, it's expanding in its sixth year to an entire month of lectures, interactive workshops, film screenings and other activities that explore questions of identity, racism, elder justice, environmental issues and more. It's part of the university's yearlong series, "Talking About Race, Gender and Power," which aims to engage the community in informed dialogue on the intersection of race, gender and power and to work toward practical solutions.

"In the national spotlight are questions about race, racial justice and patriotism, about transgender rights, about climate change and clean energy – these are questions about marginalization, disenfranchisement, and inequality," said Quezada-Grant. "We have all these flash points in the national dialogue that polarize us. This makes it even more critical to have these conversations, to understand what the problems are and to think of solutions."

With many more opportunities to understand the issues, learn how to become an advocate and to connect with allies across campus, Social Justice Month kicks off this week with the Social Justice Involvement Fair where more than 26 student clubs, organizations, academic courses, and workshop leaders will highlight the work they do and how to get involved. Check out the full schedule of events below and join the campus conversation with the hashtag, #ThinkLearnDo.

- Social Justice Involvement Fair

Wednesday, Oct. 4 • 2:00-4:00 pm

GHH Atrium

Find out which clubs, orgs, classes and professors engage in social justice work on our campus!
Join the movement!

- Social Justice Month: "Upstandership" Workshop

Wednesday, Oct. 4 • 4:00-6:00 pm

University Library – Mary Tefft White Cultural Center

Workshop training on how to *not* be a bystander, but rather how to stand up and be an advocate for others – with Philip Marshall.

- Fireside Chat with President Farish

Wednesday, Oct. 4 • 7:00-8:30 pm

University Library – Mary Tefft White Cultural Center

Hosted by the PEACE Program at RWU and the Office of President Farish and co-sponsored by Chief Diversity Officer Ame Lambert, the Multicultural Student Union, and S.A.F.E.

- Social Justice Month: "Re-enchantment: Animal Rights, Deep Ecology and Significance of Wonder"

Thursday, Oct. 5 • 3:00-4:00 pm

University Library – Mary Tefft White Cultural Center

- Social Justice Month: "Equalogy" Interactive Theater

Thursday, Oct. 5 • 4:00-6:00 pm

CAS 157

In "Equalogy" Interactive Theater, the Women's Collective for Equality and Empowerment presents a program that features two 1-hour shows that address issues related to sexual assault and relationship violence.

- Social Justice Month: SAFE to Be YOU Photo Booth

Tuesday, Oct. 10 • 12:00-2:00 pm

GHH Atrium

- Social Justice Month: "Rhode Island, Indian Affairs and the Complexity of Identity"

Wednesday, Oct. 11 • 5:00-6:30 pm

University Library – Mary Tefft White Cultural Center

The Multicultural Student Union presents a conversation with Raymond "Two Hawks" Watson, a recipient of the RI Foundation Grant to support and expand Indigenous Cultural Heritage and Tourism in Rhode Island.

- Social Justice Month: LGBTQ Community and Pumpkin Painting

Wednesday, Oct. 11 • 6:00-8:00 pm

Gender and Sexuality Center

S.A.F.E. and the campus community present "Gourds & Gays: LGBTQ Community and Pumpkin Painting."

- President's Distinguished Speakers Series: Feminist and Activist Micheline Sheehy Skeffington

Wednesday, Oct. 11 • 7:00 pm

University Library – Mary Tefft White Cultural Center

As she retraces her grandmother's U.S. speaking tour for a documentary film, "Hanna and Me: Passing on the Flame," Irish feminist and activist Micheline Sheehy Skeffington will discuss the fight for women's right to vote and for Irish independence from 1917 to 2017.

- Social Justice Month: Looming Installation of Wish Flags

Thursday, Oct. 12 • 2:00-5:00 pm

Visual Arts Center

An activity with Professor Elizabeth Duffy and the Mixed Media class. Wish Flags communicate ideas they want to bring greater awareness to: social, political and personal, to register expressions of protest and hope. This will be held outdoors in front of the Visual Arts Center. Materials available for all who wish to participate.

- Social Justice Month: Film Screening of "Equal Means Equal"

Thursday, Oct. 12 • 5:00-8:00 pm

CAS 157

- Social Justice Month: "Why Feminism Matters More Now Than Ever"

Friday, Oct. 13 • 2:00-4:00 pm

GHH 206

A discussion with Professor Meg Case.

- Social Justice Month: "Hidden Figures: Diversity and STEM"

Monday, Oct. 16 • 4:00-6:00 pm

University Library – Mary Tefft White Cultural Center

A film screening and discussion with Professor Robert Jacobson and Professor Jennifer Pearce.

- Connect with Chief Diversity Officer Ame Lambert

Tuesday, Oct. 17 • 12:00-1:00 pm

University Library – Mary Tefft White Cultural Center

- Social Justice Month: "Race, Memorialization and Memory"

Tuesday, Oct. 17 • 6:00-8:00 pm

School of Architecture, Art and Historical Preservation – Room 132

A panel discussion that features Calvin White Jr., an expert on the African-American experience and black identity in the U.S. South, joining RWU professors Julian Bonder, Autumn Quezada-Grant, and Aaron Allen.

- Social Justice Month: Performance Art Installation — "STAND"

Wednesday, Oct. 18 • 10:00-11:00 am

Library Quad

- Social Justice Month: "Break the Silence" Vigil

Wednesday, Oct. 18 • 5:30-7:00 pm

Library Quad

- Social Justice Month: "Changemaking in Global Context: RWU-Ashoka U Opportunities"

Wednesday, Oct. 18 • 6:00-8:30 pm

GHH Atrium

Ashoka U Commons Manager, Ali Fraenkel and Kate Greene from the Spiegel Center for Global and International Programs will co-facilitate a workshop focusing on civic and social changemaking capacity building. Participants will learn about the work of Ashoka's global network of social entrepreneurs, innovators, and changemakers, and how Ashoka U helps campus communities catalyze efforts to make the world a better place. Together we will explore opportunities to foster RWU changemaker efforts in global context.

- Social Justice Month: How Housing Happens

Thursday, Oct. 19 • 4:00-6:00 pm

University Library – Mary Tefft White Cultural Center

A workshop with Brenda Clement, Director of HousingWorks Rhode Island at RWU, and Ame Lambert, RWU Chief Diversity Officer. They will present an overview of housing issues in Rhode Island and connections to the larger social justice agenda.

- Social Justice Month: "180 Degrees South"

Wednesday, Oct. 25 • 6:00-8:00 pm

CAS 157

A film screening and discussion with RWU SEG Fellow Will Dittman, Professor W. Brett McKenzie, and Assistant Dean Barbara Grota.

- President's Distinguished Speakers Series: Architects Tod Williams and Billie Tsien

Wednesday, Oct. 25 • 7:00 pm

Campus Recreation Center Gymnasium

Internationally award-winning architect team and designers of the Obama Presidential Center, a living, working space to be built on the Southside of Chicago that is intended to be a hub for community and civic engagement.

ACADEMICS LIFE @ RWU PERFORMING ARTS MARIO J. GABELLI SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

FEINSTEIN SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES, ART AND EDUCATION

FEINSTEIN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL AND NATURAL SCIENCES

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